

A Province of Diversity

► How did British Columbia develop as a multi-ethnic province?

While society in 19th century British Columbia was dominated by Europeans, especially the British, newcomers from other countries came to work, raise families, and contribute to the province's development.

The Kanakas

The first non-European immigrants to British Columbia were the **Kanakas**, who travelled to the west coast of North America from the Hawaiian Islands in the early 19th century. The first Europeans to visit the Hawaiian Islands were Captain James Cook and his crew. Despite the fact that Cook was killed there in 1779, British and American vessels continued to visit the Hawaiian Islands, which were conveniently located halfway between North America and Asia. Ships were often short of crewmen, so Hawaiians were hired to fill the gaps. The new sailors quickly impressed their shipmates with their hard work and their excellent sailing and swimming skills.

By the 1820s, the Hudson's Bay Company was regularly hiring Kanakas to work at HBC posts in the Oregon Territory, especially around Fort Vancouver. By the 1840s, there were more than 200 Kanakas working near Fort Vancouver, mostly as farmers. Many more lived and worked at Fort Nisqually and Fort Langley. They married First Nations women and started families.

Kanaka a person of Hawaiian descent who immigrated to British Columbia to work; many were contracted to work with the HBC

Did You Know...

Unlike other non-European immigrants, Kanakas were regarded as British subjects and retained the right to vote and hold public office.

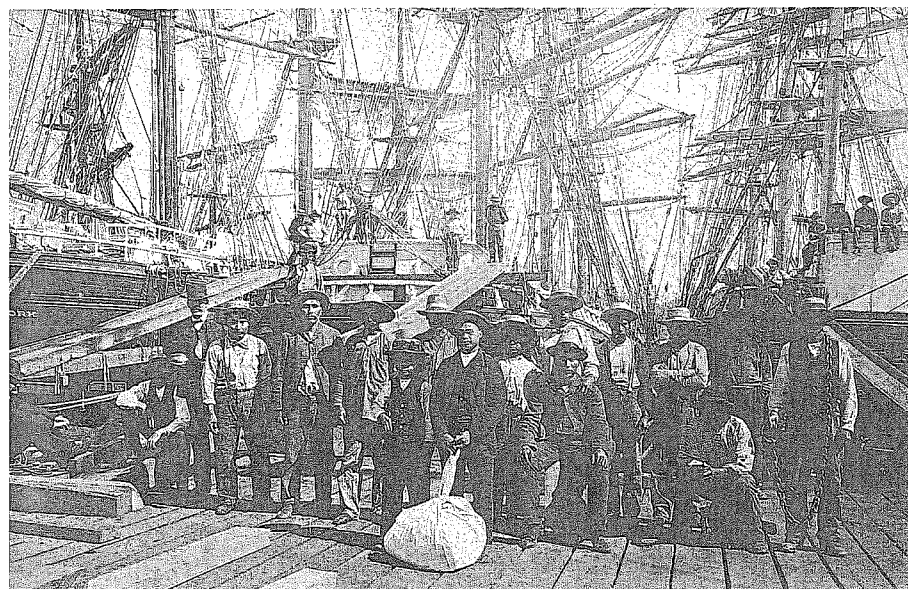


FIGURE 6-25 William Nahanee (holding a bag), a Kanaka, is seen in this 1889 photo with a group of longshoremen at the dock of the Moodyville sawmill. Describe this photo in your own words. What can be learned about this group of workers from the photo?

FIGURE 6-26 Isabella Point School class photo, 1905. What conclusions can you draw about the Salt Spring Island community to which these students belonged?



After the border between the United States and Canada was established, the HBC wound up its affairs south of the border and moved its people north. Many HBC employees, including some Kanakas, were encouraged to leave the company and start lives on their own in British Columbia.

Some Kanakas settled in Burrard Inlet, where they established a community in Coal Harbour near what is now Stanley Park and found employment at the Hastings Mill. The “Kanaka Ranch” survived until the 1890s. The descendants of this community still live in the area, mainly in North Vancouver.

The largest Kanaka community was centred on Salt Spring Island in the Gulf Islands, where the Kanaka community continued into the 20th century. In 1994, over 300 Kanaka descendants gathered on Salt Spring Island to hold a family reunion luau.

Black Immigrants

In the spring of 1858, news of the Fraser River Gold Rush reached California. Some Black citizens of San Francisco, who knew that slavery was illegal in the British Empire, travelled north to Victoria to petition James Douglas for permission to settle on Vancouver Island. Douglas agreed, and by the end of the summer, several hundred Black Americans had left California for the relative freedom of Vancouver Island.

Douglas encouraged and assisted the newcomers, even finding some members of the Black community employment. The colony of Vancouver Island had no military force to speak of at the time, so when members of the Black community expressed an interest in forming a militia unit to help defend their new home, Douglas authorized the creation of the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.

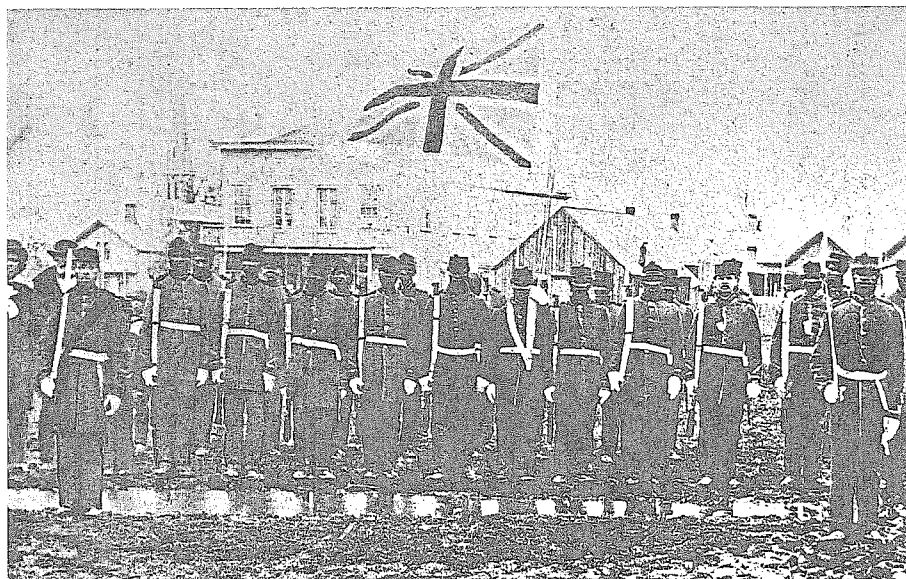


FIGURE 6-27 The Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, around 1858. Why do you think these men found it necessary to form a militia unit of their own?

Although slavery was illegal in the British Empire, Black immigrants in Victoria faced discrimination. The gold rush had caused property values in Victoria to rise, and as a result, many Black immigrants moved north to farm on Salt Spring Island.

Zoom In ► Joe Fortes



Significance

The most noted Black immigrant to British Columbia in the 19th century was not part of a group; he arrived by himself, almost by accident.

Seraphim Fortes was a crewman on a freighter that docked at Hastings Mill in late 1884. When his ship sailed, Fortes decided to stay behind, working as a bartender at a local saloon.

Fortes quickly became known among locals and customers as Joe. A man of strong morals, he disapproved of public drunkenness and often cut off patrons when they had too much to drink.

In the early 1890s, Fortes discovered English Bay and its beaches. Enthralled, he quit his steady job, built a small house on the shore, and established

himself as the unofficial guardian of the beach.

For the next 30 years, Joe Fortes was Vancouver's most popular citizen. He taught virtually every child in town to swim. Joe also saved many lives. At night, he patrolled English Bay, keeping it safe for everyone.

As the city grew, the need for a paid lifeguard became apparent, and the city council hired Fortes, making him a special constable.

In 1922, Joe Fortes died of pneumonia. Thousands of Vancouverites attended his funeral. A memorial to Joe Fortes stands today at English Bay.

- Why are people like Fortes important to the history of our communities?



FIGURE 6-28 Joe Fortes. Discuss the contributions Fortes made to Vancouver and its people.

Jewish Immigrants

Did You Know...

The synagogue built in Victoria, Congregation Emanu-El, is the oldest synagogue in continuous operation in Canada.

The first Jewish immigrants arrived in British Columbia in 1858. They came primarily from England and Europe, and many had already participated in the California Gold Rush. Rather than seeking gold themselves, many went into business, selling supplies to gold miners on both Vancouver Island and on the mainland. By 1863, the Jewish community in Victoria was well established. A synagogue was built, and members became active in community affairs.

Zoom In ➤ The Oppenheims

The five Oppenheimer brothers, Charles, Meyer, Isaac, Godfrey, and David, had emigrated with their family from Germany in 1848. In California, they opened several supply stores. Ten years later, the family moved to Vancouver Island, starting a trading company with outlets in Victoria, Yale, and Barkerville.

In the early 1860s, David Oppenheimer led the campaign to persuade James Douglas that the Cariboo Road should go all the way to Barkerville. Oppenheimer also believed that one day Burrard Inlet would become a seaport, especially after the completion of the CPR, which he was sure would end there. He bought a lot of land, and opened a store just west of Gastown.

When William Van Horne arrived in 1884, Oppenheimer knew that the CPR would need a great deal of space, but most of the land in the area was already owned. He offered half of his land in Burrard Inlet, and half of the property of other landowners, to the CPR free of charge. Van Horne readily agreed. It was a shrewd deal. Oppenheimer knew

his remaining land would increase in value once the railway was completed.

In 1888, Oppenheimer was chosen as Vancouver's second mayor. In his four terms as mayor, he established most of the city's infrastructure. Pipes were laid under Burrard Inlet to bring a clean supply of water from the North Shore. Oppenheimer bankrolled the new electric street-car system (the third in North

America), built a sewage system, donated land for schools and parks, and established Stanley Park. Fittingly, he is known as the "Father of Vancouver."

- It can be said that the Oppenheimers were responsible opportunists. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Provide evidence to support your answer.

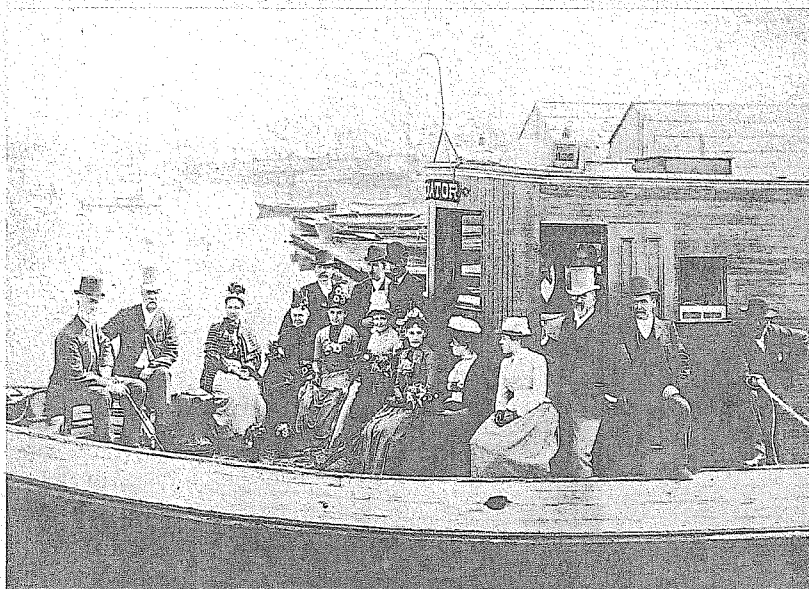


FIGURE 6-29 David Oppenheimer (third from right) taking civic dignitaries on a tour of Vancouver Harbour, around 1890. How does this family's success reflect the overall development of British Columbia?

The Chinese

The largest group of non-European immigrants to British Columbia in the 19th century were the Chinese. They also faced some of the most brutal forms of discrimination.

The first Chinese immigrants to North America came to California in the 1850s, and like so many others, they moved north in response to news of the Fraser River Gold Rush. As in California, they faced discrimination from other miners. Realizing that their opportunities were limited, Chinese miners started by reworking claims abandoned by European and American miners. Such claims were less expensive to buy, and if worked patiently, usually produced a reasonable amount of gold. By the 1870s, most of the small claims still being worked in British Columbia were operated by Chinese miners.

Other Chinese immigrants helped develop the economy of the province by starting service industries—stores, restaurants, and laundries—in frontier mining towns. They also operated vegetable farms both in the interior and near coastal communities.



FIGURE 6-30 A street scene in the Chinese section of Victoria in 1886. Did immigration to British Columbia help the local economy? If so, why would any group have been prevented from entering the province?